The Leakey Foundation Oral History of Human Origins Research: Richard Wrangham

Interview conducted by
Bernard Wood
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Bernard Wood (00:00:00):

Thank you for agreeing to do this. If you could just give us your name and the position that you relatively recently retired from.

Richard Wrangham (00:00:11):

Well, thank you for doing this. My name is Richard Wrangham and I retired in 2020 as the Ruth Moore Professor of Biological Anthropology in the Department of Human Evolutionary Biology at Harvard University.

Bernard Wood (00:00:29):

Thank you very much. When were you first aware of primates and when were you first aware of chimpanzees? Is this something you learned at school or was this a university? You went to Oxford. What did you read at Oxford?

Richard Wrangham (00:00:54):

I was an undergraduate at Oxford and read zoology. There was a class of something like 25 students, and there was one lecture, I think, on primates during the three years I was there. I attended it, unlike many of the lectures, I am ashamed to say. But it did not particularly inspire me, even though by that time I was interested in the social behavior of mammals. I had spent a gap year between high school and university in Kafue National Park in Zambia, working as a research assistant to a guy called John Hanks, who seemed about 55 at the time, but actually I think he was more like 25. He was leading a study of an antelope, the Defassa waterbuck. That led to me being a co-author on one of the first descriptions of the social behavior and organization of waterbuck. And that inspired just more interest in animals in general, mammals in particular.

Bernard Wood (00:02:14):

But that's a ... I mean, for most of us, a gap year was a little more prosaic. How did you get linked up with this chap?

Richard Wrangham (00:02:27):

Well, I was interested in natural history at school. I was a birdwatcher and went on birdwatching expeditions. And I ended up writing a ton of letters to people, sort of any connection I could find. But in fact, in the end, it came down to following the footsteps of a friend of the family. That was a guy called Mark Stanley Price who ended up-

Bernard Wood (00:02:58):
Really? Yeah.

Richard Wrangham (00:02:58):
... in a career of working with antelope.

Bernard Wood (00:03:03):
Yes.

Richard Wrangham (00:03:04):
So you know him. You knew him.

Bernard Wood (00:03:06):
Well, I met him in Kenya.

Richard Wrangham (00:03:07):
Okay.

Bernard Wood (00:03:08):
And he was ... Yes. Oh, indeed. Well, I mean, I mean-

Richard Wrangham (00:03:13):
He became a director of the African Wildlife Foundation in Nairobi.

Bernard Wood (00:03:17):
Okay, okay.

Richard Wrangham (00:03:19):
Yeah. So he had spent nine months with John Hanks in Zambia and I ended up following him and being paid a shilling a day for my inestimable value.

Bernard Wood (00:03:35):
So Richard, if anybody asked you in your first year at Oxford what you were going to do for the rest of your life, what would the answer have been?

Richard Wrangham (00:03:45):
Oh, field work in Africa.

Bernard Wood (00:03:47):

Really?

Richard Wrangham (00:03:48):

On my first day in Oxford as an undergraduate, I went to some sort of fair for societies, and found an expedition club. And that led me to, with Mark Stanley Price, I may say, organize an expedition to go to Kenya in the summer. We planned to study the elusive bongo forest antelope, which we did. We spent much of our term time organizing that expedition.

Bernard Wood (00:04:20):

Right. Okay.

Richard Wrangham (00:04:21):

On that expedition, we were in the Cherangani Hills of Western Kenya, and we discovered the presence of a golden mole. At that time it was the northernmost record of a golden mole in Africa, the only continent where golden moles occur. That led to questions about why it was there and what stopped it from expanding its range further, and so on. So the next year I went back to Kenya on another expedition with another person who spent his life in mammalian behavioral ecology, Patrick Duncan, who ended up studying the horses of the Camargue.

Bernard Wood (00:05:10):

Okay. So this was an early interest, an early preoccupation. So let's go back to your last year at Oxford. You were presumably already determined to do a doctorate?

Richard Wrangham (00:05:32):

Yes. I wanted to do that. That's right.

Bernard Wood (00:05:35):

And how did you decide with whom and where to do that?

Richard Wrangham (00:05:40):

Okay. So this is embarrassing because what I did was to develop ideas for a study related to human evolution. That was fine but here was my very naive approach. I said to myself, okay, humans are social diurnal carnivores. And so what can I find to study? And I zeroed in on banded mongooses, even though they are obviously limited in their utility as a model for humans. But nevertheless, I was sort of

interested in the principle. The embarrassing aspect was that although I got a provisional fellowship from the Royal Society Leverhulme Grant, my final exams were adjudged by Professor John Pringle, the Head of the Department of Zoology, and he said, "Not good enough." He would not support me for the funds that I had been tentatively awarded.

Bernard Wood (00:06:54):

Okay, Richard. So stop there. What was your reaction?

Richard Wrangham (00:07:01):

Oh.

Bernard Wood (00:07:03):

Did you think you were right and he was wrong or do you think ...

Richard Wrangham (00:07:08):

Oh, no. I recognized that I was actually just not prepared for the exams. At Oxford, everything depended on your final exam. And I had not been a serious student. I'd spent too much time playing with expeditions and not going to lectures and so on. I knew a few subjects really well, but I did not know probably 75% of the curriculum. So it was disgraceful. And my attitude was: “time to pull your socks up and take seriously whatever you do next.”

Bernard Wood (00:07:47):

Right.

Richard Wrangham (00:07:47):

Right.

Bernard Wood (00:07:49):

Was there any parental influence at this stage or were you largely on your own in terms of your education?

Richard Wrangham (00:07:59):

Well, I would say I was on my own. I mean, my parents were very supportive but neither one was a biologist. My father had been a very good classical scholar, and so I think he was sort of slightly chagrined, but I was very lucky because my tutor at Oxford was a man called Harold Pusey, an expert on the chondrocranium of the

frog. Frog chondrocrania did not appeal to me directly, but his daughter, Anne, was in the same class of zoology that I had been a part of. And he said to me, "Tut, tut, but why don't you write to Jane Goodall because Anne Pusey, my daughter, is going off to work with Jane and maybe there's room for you too."

Bernard Wood (00:08:55):

I see. Well, I had no idea.

Richard Wrangham (00:08:58):

So this was an undeserved fortuitous event.

Bernard Wood (00:09:04):

Okay. A very distinguished name at Oxford. Was that the Anglo-Catholic family, the Puseys?

Richard Wrangham (00:09:15):

That's an interesting question. I don't know how far they go back. It probably is.

Bernard Wood (00:09:18):

Okay. Okay.

Richard Wrangham (00:09:19):

Yeah, I should ask Anne.

Bernard Wood (00:09:21):

Okay. So you wrote to Jane Goodall, and at what stage was she? I mean, she had gone to ... She was one of Louis Leakey's three females who were allocated to different great apes, Dian Fossey and Birute Galdikas. Jane was the first, is that right?

Richard Wrangham (00:09:53):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:09:54):

Okay. And so what year are we talking about? 19 ...

Richard Wrangham (00:10:00):

1970.

Bernard Wood (00:10:02):

1970. And when did she first go to Gombe?

Richard Wrangham (00:10:06):

July 1960.

Bernard Wood (00:10:08):

Okay. So she'd been there a decade. Were you and Anne really the first generation after Jane Goodall to work as researchers at Gombe?

Richard Wrangham (00:10:24):

Yes, pretty much. But there was a sort of a slow increase in both the number and the degree of education of the students who came to assist Jane. A big turning point was the birth of her son, who she called Grub, because after Grub was born, it wasn't really very practical for Jane to be in Gombe. And so starting in the late 1960s, she started having assistants of various kinds coming and working in Gombe. But 1970 was the time when she took in a bit of a wave of students. She had eight students, I think, that year, of whom three were from Oxford. David Bygott had preceded Anne there, and there were others from various places and countries. So this was Jane at an advanced age of something like, what was she? She was 36. Now for the first time she was really giving her study to other people. And of course she was totally untutored except for having written up her PhD in Cambridge.

Bernard Wood (00:11:56):

Okay. But we should remind the people listening to this that you did your PhD at Cambridge with Robert Hinde, and Robert Hinde was the sort of sponsor of Jane. Is that right? Have I got that right?

Richard Wrangham (00:12:13):

Yes. She did her PhD with Robert Hinde.

Bernard Wood (00:12:15):

Okay. Okay. Who I met once or twice, my impression of him was that he was just a lovely man.

Richard Wrangham (00:12:26):

A lovely man?

Bernard Wood (00:12:27):

Yes.

Richard Wrangham (00:12:28):

Yes, he was a lovely man. He was sort of rather charming in a way, but totally intimidating if you were a student.

Bernard Wood (00:12:40):

Ah, okay. Oh, that's interesting. Okay. So could you share with us the nature of this intimidation?

Richard Wrangham (00:12:50):

Well, he really wanted to get everything right, and he wanted to make sure his students got everything right. So if there was a seminar and a student said something that was slightly off beam, it would be very sharply corrected.

Bernard Wood (00:13:03):

He would be sharply corrected publicly or afterwards?

Richard Wrangham (00:13:08):

Publicly, yes, in the seminar. This got to the point where the students, just as I was arriving as a graduate student in Cambridge, the students went to Robert. The students were led by Pat McGinnis who had studied at Gombe and said, "Robert, we've got this weekly seminar with you, which is very good from the point of view of all our learning, but I've got to say the students are slightly intimidated and we were just wondering if it'd be okay to have a seminar on our own without you there." And Robert said (he was a very caring person, as you say): "Yes, of course. Let's all meet and talk about this." And so a week later, there was a meeting and 10 or so students trooped in and met with Robert. And Robert said, "Well, look, I understand that some of you feel rather intimidated by me. Anybody want to talk about this?" Of course, there was absolute silence. So he said, "Well, if there's no problem, let's carry on as we were."

Bernard Wood (00:14:18):

I'm sorry, I'm virtually falling off my chair here because I can imagine this. All right. Okay. So there were all these students at Gombe. Who was in your year at Cambridge with Robert Hinde?

Richard Wrangham (00:14:39):

Well, the notable people from my point of view were those studying gorillas and baboons. Dian Fossey was writing up her PhD in the neighboring office and Sandy Harcourt and Kelly Stewart, a year or two behind her. Those three all had fascinating things to say about their studies. And then Robert Seyfarth and Dorothy Cheney were back from the field where they had been studying baboons. This was before they started their work on vervet monkeys, but they were terrific scientists already.

Bernard Wood (00:15:31):

Right. I mean, the impression I get is that there was not much interest in primates, and then suddenly the dam burst, and there were a whole bunch of people doing this. Is that a correct impression?

Richard Wrangham (00:15:50):

Yes, I think that's probably right. The reason that Robert became Jane Goodall's advisor was because he already had a study going, but of captive (not wild) macaques. His interest in monkey social behavior came from his knowing John Bowlby, the psychologist. So he came very much from a psychological perspective to using monkeys as models for understanding impacts on humans, in particular the mother-infant relationship.

Bernard Wood (00:16:20):

And was Bowlby the guy who was involved in maternal and infant relationships and bonding and that sort of thing, or have I got-

Richard Wrangham (00:16:30):

Yes. Yes, right. He was very interested in attachment and the evolution of attachment, so yeah, that's right.

Bernard Wood (00:16:44):

So for those who are listening to this who are used to the current US system of coursework and so on, would you like to describe what being a graduate student at Cambridge was like? How much coursework was there? [inaudible 00:16:59] answer to this.

Richard Wrangham (00:17:04):

There was no coursework at all. This was something I came to regret when I was thrown into a teaching position at Harvard. The aim of a graduate program was to get the student finished in three years. And that was, of course, challenging because you would take some time to work out what you were going to do in the first place, you had to go and do it, and then you had to write it up. Three years is quite tight for that given the need for at least a year of fieldwork. From the point of view of my learning about human evolution, not only was there no coursework, but also, the place where all of us were doing our work was in the subdepartment of Animal Behaviour in Madingley, a couple of miles outside Cambridge. So we were cut off from the rest of the university in a subdepartment of zoology. We had nothing to do with anthropology. 00:18:03 I never met an anthropologist when I was in Cambridge doing my graduate work.

Bernard Wood (00:18:08):

So if you were able to, who were the anthropologists at that time in Cambridge? This is 19-

Richard Wrangham (00:18:17):

I think Alan Bilsborough.

Bernard Wood (00:18:19):

Right. Okay. Okay. Okay. Because I used to go up and do some lectures for Alan. Okay. Right. Okay. And I'm trying to remember the title of your thesis. I know it starts with behavioral ecology.

Richard Wrangham (00:18:39):

Of chimpanzees in Gombe National Park, Tanzania.

Bernard Wood (00:18:42):

Right. So how old was behavioral ecology then?

Richard Wrangham (00:18:48):

Oh, a very nascent discipline, I would say.

Bernard Wood (00:18:51):

Yes, yes. So it's a bit gutsy to call your PhD behavioral ecology.

Richard Wrangham (00:19:00):

Yes. I think someone may have pointed out that it was rather sort of grandiose. It should have been something more like “Aspects of behavioral ecology…”

Bernard Wood (00:19:21):

Okay.

Richard Wrangham (00:19:22):

I got by with it. But because we're recording this in the context of thinking about the development of biological anthropology and human evolutionary studies, it's worth pointing out that at that time, the field was only just beginning to understand how to think about animal social organization in terms of evolutionary ecology. It was only in 1966 that George Williams had published the book, *Adaptation and Natural Selection.* That book really got people thinking for the first time clearly about separating off individual selection from group selection. And it was only with that insight that people could start asking the appropriate kinds of questions about adaptation of animals to their environment. Williams’ book was '66. I started as a graduate student in '71.

Bernard Wood (00:20:30):

Yeah. No, it's a really good idea to remind people because I think there is a sort of historicist way that sometimes the graduate students of today think that we've always known what we know today, and of course that's not the case. And those of us who did our PhDs in the 1970s, we did them in really in a very different intellectual environment and then the one that now prevails. So you defended your thesis. Who was your examiner?

Richard Wrangham (00:21:20):

I had two examiners. One was Keith Eltringham, the inside examiner for Cambridge, who studied elephants among other things. He was very much an ecologist. The other was Hans Kruuk-

Bernard Wood (00:21:34):

Good Lord.

Richard Wrangham (00:21:37):

Who was a student of Niko Tinbergen. Kruuk had made his name studying the social behavior of spotted hyaenas.

Bernard Wood (00:21:44):

Yes. Yes, okay.

Richard Wrangham (00:21:47):

So he was a behavioral ecologist.

Bernard Wood (00:21:49):

Okay. So you were now in 1975, you had your PhD from Cambridge, and if somebody stopped you in the street on the way to the pub in Cambridge and said, "What do you think you are going to be doing in 10 years time," what would your answer have been?

Richard Wrangham (00:22:07):

Well, I did have the very remote ambition of studying humans ultimately as one more species. As an undergraduate, I had been a member of a thing called the Human Sciences Committee, something like that, that was introducing a new course on the human sciences to Oxford. And I have to remember that fact because I've sort of forgotten much of how this worked, but it reminds me that I was actually very interested in the notion of being able to study humans from the point of view of this nascent field of behavioral ecology. And I remember now talking to a friend at the end of my time in Oxford saying, "I want to come back one day and be a professor of human sciences at Oxford."

Bernard Wood (00:23:13):

Okay. Well, you achieved a lot of things, but you weren't professor of human sciences at Oxford.

Richard Wrangham (00:23:20):

Very true.

Bernard Wood (00:23:20):

Let's explore why that might be. So after Cambridge, you went to Bristol in the psychology department?

Richard Wrangham (00:23:32):

Yes. So there was a postdoctoral opportunity to study geladas in highland Ethiopia.

Bernard Wood (00:23:42):

With?

Richard Wrangham (00:23:43):
With John Hurrell Crook.

Bernard Wood (00:23:45):
Yes.

Richard Wrangham (00:23:47):
Who was one of the sort of founding members really of the study of, for him, it was called socioecology more than behavioral ecology, but essentially the same thing. He'd written a couple of papers on birds and then one on primates. He became Britain's first and foremost primate behavioral ecologist.

Bernard Wood (00:24:12):
Yes, I remember going to at least one lecture by him, but as I was medically trained and ecology was not something that I was that familiar with. I think it was probably lost on me. Then you went from Bristol. When was the first time you went to the US and where did you go?

Richard Wrangham (00:24:39):
I went to Stanford because there was a connection between Gombe and Stanford. My time in Bristol studying geladas was cut short by a couple of kidnappings of my colleagues in Ethiopia, which in John Crook's judgment meant that it was unsafe for me to continue in Ethiopia. I did just a couple of months of fieldwork there, in the end.

Bernard Wood (00:25:07):
And these were the Ethiopian Highlands?

Richard Wrangham (00:25:09):
In the Ethiopian Highlands in the Simien Mountains, that's right. I was threatened by rebels while I was there, and ran into them once. Shortly before that, in May 1975, there had been a kidnapping of students at Gombe, which had led to a lot of data being taken to Stanford where there was meant to be an ongoing program involving undergraduates at Stanford doing research in Gombe. So when Ethiopian fieldwork became a problem, I was brought to Stanford in a sort of rescue mission. I

was brought in to help with organizing the data that were coming in from Gombe, by computerizing it as a longterm resource.

Bernard Wood (00:26:01):

Okay. Okay.

Richard Wrangham (00:26:02):

My move to Stanford was thanks to the academic psychiatrist David Hamburg, who was a significant figure in the developing studies of great apes.

Bernard Wood (00:26:12):

Well, there's almost no significant figure thus far that you haven't been linked with, but let's keep going. So from Stanford, did you go to Cambridge from Stanford?

Richard Wrangham (00:26:28):

Well, after Stanford, I was not sure what to do. And in fact, I must admit that I filled out an application form to do a master's in tropical agronomy because I was thinking about shifting fields. But then the leading primatologist Irven DeVore had a heart attack, which meant that at short notice he needed someone to take over his teaching responsibilities at Harvard for a year. I had met DeVore when he came to Gombe with Robert Trivers in 1972, and when he invited me to Harvard I was thrilled to accept. This led to a terrifying year of having to produce three lectures a week on topics that I'd never heard anyone lecture about. So I was the classic beginning teacher, having to do speed-reading and write my lectures the night before.

Bernard Wood (00:27:26):

Okay. So that was the deep end in a big way.

Richard Wrangham (00:27:28):

That's right.

Bernard Wood (00:27:30):

Okay. Okay. What was your impression of Irv DeVore? I asked this because when I met him, I was probably the smallest minnow in any pond that he'd ever contemplated, but he was enormously kind and very smart and insightful.

Richard Wrangham (00:28:00):

Yes, I think those are all good and appropriate words. I owe him a lot. He was fantastically supportive. I loved the fact that he had a big vision because of his interest in human evolution. He'd studied baboons, but then of course he'd gone off and worked on the Harvard !Kung Project, or Bushman Project, which he initiated together with his student, Richard Lee. DeVore was perhaps the first person who'd studied both primates and humans, at least from the point of view of thinking about the evolution of their societies. He had an expansive vision and he was enormously good at connecting people from different fields and inspiring them to get going. He was not a detail person himself. He was rather like Louis Leakey, I think, in the sense of providing an inspiring vision and wanting to get things going in all sorts of different areas.

Bernard Wood (00:29:13):

Okay. Okay. So what was your impression of Harvard that year?

Richard Wrangham (00:29:19):

Well, it was a fascinating time. I went in 1976 and taught for nine months until 1977. In 1975, Ed Wilson had published the book, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*.

Bernard Wood (00:29:33):

Absolutely. And you will probably not be surprised to know that I reviewed it for Nature because I think they had a lot of difficulty finding anybody-

Richard Wrangham (00:29:46):

Who was prepared to run the risk of ...

Bernard Wood (00:29:49):

Yes, yes, yes.

Richard Wrangham (00:29:51):

How interesting. What did you say?

Bernard Wood (00:29:53):

I'd have to look it up, but Ed Wilson, I was at a meeting And I was talking after him and he gave his talk and then he was off to some other meeting or to fly out. And as he was walking up the stairs of the lecture theater, he was dropping his lecture notes. And so I thought, "Well, I'm sure he needs these for the next place he's going." And so I followed him up the stairs and picked up his lecture notes and gave

it to him and he said, "Thank you very much." So that's my only personal relationship with E.O.
Wilson.

Richard Wrangham (00:30:33):

Well, yeah, he was another wonderful man and extraordinarily kind. I mean, a sort of classic Southern gentleman, although he came from a humble background. But what was significant, of course, was that he had written this book in the face of terrific opposition from within his own department.

Bernard Wood (00:30:58):

Yes, yes. And Richard Lewontin, I guess, would've been in the van of that.

Richard Wrangham (00:31:04):

Yeah. So there was a sense of tremendous intellectual excitement at Harvard that year. The weekly meetings of the Simian Seminar, a weekly discussion group hosted by DeVore in his home, were filled not only with new ideas but also with a sense of uprighteousness. This sense of righteousness was inspired by the constant attacks on largely political grounds from Lewontin and Gould, who of course were very smart people, but they did, I think, allow their judgment to be, as it were, shortened by their insistence on avoiding any kind of biological analysis of human society. Now, in fairness, I think that Ed Wilson was pretty premature in what he was saying. So there was right on both sides. It made for a wonderfully cracking atmosphere.

Bernard Wood (00:32:09):

Okay. So from this atmosphere, you were offered the research fellowship at King's?

Richard Wrangham (00:32:16):

Yes. Three years in the King's College, Sociobiology Research Group in Cambridge.

Bernard Wood (00:32:26):

And who was running that and who else was there?

Richard Wrangham (00:32:31):

It was run by Pat Bateson.

Bernard Wood (00:32:39):

Oh, yes.

Richard Wrangham (00:32:39):

He became Provost of King's.

Bernard Wood (00:32:39):

Yes.

Richard Wrangham (00:32:39):

And then probably the most senior person there was Tim Clutton-Brock, all of two years ahead of me as it were. There was him, there was Brian Bertram who'd studied lions and ostriches. There was Dan Rubenstein from USA, who had studied horse behavior, and Robin Dunbar, who had preceded me studying geladas in Ethiopia. And he'd been doing the gelada study that I tried to follow and didn't. So those were the main people. Then we had visitors occasionally like Geoff Parker, who was a very brilliant theoretical behavioral ecologist.

Bernard Wood (00:33:25):

That's right. He went on to Liverpool and I was lucky to be a colleague of his at Liverpool.

Richard Wrangham (00:33:30):

Okay. Yeah.

Bernard Wood (00:33:31):

Yeah. Wow.

Richard Wrangham (00:33:32):

And Napoleon Chagnon.

Bernard Wood (00:33:34):

Oh. Wow. So you didn't exactly go from a hotbed to something quiet. I mean, there was a lot going on at King's.

Richard Wrangham (00:33:50):

Yes, that's right. And again, it was an exciting place to be. And again, terrific weekly seminars that brought in all the people who were doing cutting edge work in this area. But still, very much behavioral ecology, sociobiology, not primatology per se, or biological anthropology.

Bernard Wood (00:34:15):

Right. And so you had a three-year fellowship, you needed to get a job. The idea of doing a master's degree in agronomy had fallen by the wayside. And so what if you had a fairy godfather, where would you have liked to get a job and how did you get to Michigan?

Richard Wrangham (00:34:42):

Well, I'm pausing on the fairy godmother question because-

Bernard Wood (00:34:48):

No, but it was a fairy godfather in this case.

Richard Wrangham (00:34:52):

Okay. I can't remember having any particular wishes.

Bernard Wood (00:35:01):

Okay. Okay.

Richard Wrangham (00:35:02):

I certainly didn't mind about the idea of leaving England at the time. It was a bit of a brain drain era, and the opportunities in the States seemed terrific. I was very lucky because the University of Michigan had got in touch with me in the form of an invitation from Richard Alexander. Dick Alexander was trying to build up a group of people in different departments in the university who shared the now modern perspective on behavioral ecology because he wanted to get people thinking about human social evolution from this perspective. So he had managed to create a group of like-minded people in different departments. Bobbi Low was in the Department of Natural Resources, Barb Smuts, Warren Holmes and David Buss came to the Department of Psychology, Randy Nesse was in Psychiatry, and Alan Gibbard was in Philosophy. Again, a wonderful group to be able to join. I went into the Department of Anthropology.

Bernard Wood (00:36:07):

And so you were sort of part of a sort of cluster hub and you were the anthropologist?

Richard Wrangham (00:36:13):

Yes. I mean, the cluster was over several years, but nevertheless, that's right. That was the aim.

Bernard Wood (00:36:18):

Okay. Okay. What was your impression of Ann Arbor and what was your impression of the university?

Richard Wrangham (00:36:30):

Well, what can I say? A very strong university. It's very large. It's got a very fine museum with the museum having both very good anthropologists and very good biologists. There were lots of opportunities there. Let me put it this way. When Harvard offered me a job, whatever it was, eight years later, I turned them down at first because I was so happy in Michigan.

Bernard Wood (00:37:08):

Ah, okay.

Richard Wrangham (00:37:10):

And so it was a very comfortable place to be with lots of excellent colleagues. There were also some fascinating sort of controversies going on. Milford Wolpoff and Loring Brace were there and battling with each other. [inaudible 00:37:25]-

Bernard Wood (00:37:25):

Well, that's what I was going to ask you.

Richard Wrangham (00:37:26):

About the excitements of paleoanthropology?

Bernard Wood (00:37:30):

Okay. So one of the interesting things about this conversation is the overlap in our experience. I don't want to suggest that I'm comparing myself with you, but you talked about Kelly Stewart. She came to Koobi Fora when I went there in 1968.

Richard Wrangham (00:37:54):

Oh, really?

Bernard Wood (00:37:55):

Yeah. Yeah.

Richard Wrangham (00:37:57):

I didn't know she'd been there.

Bernard Wood (00:37:58):

Yes, yeah.

Richard Wrangham (00:37:59):

Yeah. Gracious. What fun.

Bernard Wood (00:38:05):

And the other thing we have in common was that we both got involved in Uganda. And so how did you move away from the focus on the chimpanzees in Gombe to start thinking about looking at chimpanzees in other locations?

Richard Wrangham (00:39:02):

Well, in the early 80s, by the early 80s, I'd done one or two things other than the Gombe chimps. I had worked with geladas briefly. I then studied the vervet monkeys that Dorothy Cheney and Robert Seyfarth had habituated and worked on in Amboseli in Kenya. And then just before going to Michigan, I spent nine months in Northeastern Congo in the Ituri Forest working with people, a project that became the Ituri Project on the Efe and the Lese people. And having done all those things, I realized that the thing that really interested me was chimps. And it was-

Bernard Wood (00:39:54):

Can you explain that? I mean, when you say that really interested you, you had all these opportunities, what is it about chimps? And we need to remind people that this was at a time when the close genetic relationship between modern humans and chimps and bonobos was yet to be confirmed.

Richard Wrangham (00:40:19):

Yes, indeed that's right. Well, the thing that I was very struck by was the fact that during the time that I had been in Gombe, we were really still discovering a lot of new things. This was 10 years into Jane's study, but the way that she had done her study was that after about three years of spending time trying to follow chimps in the forest wherever they went, she settled down and in a small area, just sort of, I don't know, 50 meters across, something like that, she put out bananas for the chimps. She then spent almost all of her time watching them in this small area. The results were terrific. She got wonderful details on behavioral interactions and

relationships, but she didn't understand the larger behavioral ecology. So the period of the late '60s and early '70s, when I and other students were there, was the first time that people were able to take fully habituated chimps, chimps that didn't mind being followed by people at all, and just go everywhere with them, wherever they went.

(00:41:41):

As a result, we discovered that contrary to what Jane had thought, there were social communities that were hostile to each other. Contrary to the received wisdom, the chimp population was not just a continuous set of chimps who were friendly to each other all over the entire park. This was when we started discovering not just hostility, but killing.

Bernard Wood (00:42:07):

Right.

Richard Wrangham (00:42:07):

So then the big question after that was, well, is this just Gombe or is this other places as well and how much is it due to the particular environment here and so on? So I wanted to go to another kind of environment and see what was similar and what was different.

Bernard Wood (00:42:27):

And why did you pick where you went?

Richard Wrangham (00:42:31):

Well, I had a year at the Stanford Center for Advanced Studies in Behavioral Sciences as one of five primatologists co-editing a book on *Primate Societies*. Tom Struhsaker was one of that group, and I asked his advice about where to study wild chimpanzees.

Bernard Wood (00:42:56):

What year was this, Richard?

Richard Wrangham (00:42:58):

This was 1983 to '84.

Bernard Wood (00:42:58):

Okay. Okay. So this is when you were at Michigan, but you weren't for a year?

Richard Wrangham (00:43:07):

That's right. I was on some kind of sabbatical.

Bernard Wood (00:43:10):

Okay. Okay.

Richard Wrangham (00:43:13):

And so Struhsaker suggested Kibale because he actually had a Ugandan graduate student that he was working with there who was studying the chimps. That was Gilbert Isabiriye-Basuta. So I went out to Kibale and there was a very practical reason for choosing this particular site, which was that it was healthy and I had small children and I knew I'd be spending a year at a time there or many months at least. So that was helpful.

Bernard Wood (00:43:44):

Well, I remember you very kindly allowed me to visit Kibale when I was in Uganda because I went to Uganda after the violence or, well, I mean, there were several episodes of violence in Uganda. The Nuffield Foundation wanted to try and help Makerere. And so they were looking for people who were willing to be paired with academics at Makerere. And so I got paired up with a lecturer in the anatomy department. So that's how I got out to Uganda. But at that stage, we lived in a university compound outside of Kampala. And when you drove in the big dead bodies on the road, I mean, it was pretty rough. So I'm impressed that you thought it was a good place to take your children, but things changed pretty quickly, I think.

Richard Wrangham (00:45:03):

Well, yes, January 1986 was the critical time. That's when the current president, Yoweri Museveni, took over and the next day I sent my applications in. And so for the first year or two, it was a bit hairy because there were still roving bands of people with guns and so on, but it was a safe place to be where we were hiding out in the West, and that was fine.

Bernard Wood (00:45:35):

Yes. Yeah. Yeah. So let's go on. So you turned Harvard down, but they presumably came back?

Richard Wrangham (00:45:48):

Yes.

Bernard Wood (00:45:50):

And what made you say yes subsequently?

Richard Wrangham (00:45:58):

Well, DeVore was there and he was very encouraging and flattering. And he made a very practical point. He said, "If the economy goes sideways, then a big private university is a better place to be than a big public university." So that was an angle from the point of view of being able to do fieldwork and so on. And then from the point of view of the intellectual aspects, David Pilbeam was there persuading me about the new genetic data showing that humans and chimps were more closely related to each other than chimps and gorillas were. And the way he talked was thoroughly inspiring because he had a vision that I really enjoyed. I realized he'd be a wonderful colleague from the point of view of thinking about the broader significance of my somewhat limited primate studies.

Bernard Wood (00:47:12):

Yes. I mean, I wouldn't agree with the somewhat limited, but yes, I can see that. And your collaboration with David looking at chimps as the, or rather absorbing the genetic evidence and looking at chimps as a model, how did that come about and how did the paper that you wrote together come about?

Richard Wrangham (00:47:46):

Well, I can't remember really, but the big picture was that he totally persuaded me. I mean, he showed me the data and the Sibley-Ahlquist paper and follow-ups, and I grappled with that and came to understand the significance of thinking about chimps as a, what should we call it, a close proximity to a model for the seven million-year-old ancestor, if that's the right date. And the paper that we wrote together that you are thinking of probably is the one where we considered bonobos as well as chimps.

Bernard Wood (00:48:35):

Yes. I'm sorry. Using chimps, as I said, sort of shorthand for.

Richard Wrangham (00:48:39):

Okay. Yeah.

Bernard Wood (00:48:40):

Shorthand for panins.

Richard Wrangham (00:48:44):

So I think this was 2001 when we published that paper. By this time I had been teaching enough that I really needed to get into understanding the differences between bonobos and chimps. And it was wonderful to be able to work with David to shore up the paleo and the genetic aspect of the hypothesis that I had become entranced by, namely that bonobos were a species that were derived from chimpanzees in ways that ultimately mimic what we see in domesticated animals in their relationship to their wild ancestors.

Bernard Wood (00:49:39):

So Richard, you've been a very successful author, not only of research publications, but of books. It strikes me that you need a certain level of self-confidence and chutzpah to write a book. Where did that come from? When did you get a sense that you had something to say that you could say in a book that made a book a possibility?

Richard Wrangham (00:50:17):

As a prolegomenon to my answer on that, I would draw attention to the fact that when I said to my father that I was interested in an academic career, he said, "Well, that's okay, but do make sure that you don't publish papers just for your colleagues. Make sure that you communicate to the world at large as well, because that's the whole point about studies." Of course that’s not really true. I mean, some of the very best scientists publish only works of technical scholarship. But nevertheless, I was kind of persuaded. And so I always felt it was an obligation in a way. I felt that the chimpanzee-bonobo comparison was so interesting that it was likely that people would share my interest. And I was actually at a New Year's Eve party with my friend and author, Dale Peterson, and was telling him about it, when he said, "Well, why don't we do it together?" You talk about self-confidence. I don't think I would've ever got going unless I'd had someone sharing the adventure on that one.

Bernard Wood (00:51:39):

Okay. And tell me about mechanics of it. I mean, how do you find ... Did you have an agent? How did you decide where to pitch it and what publishers?

Richard Wrangham (00:51:51):

Dale already had an agent and we just went with him and sent in a couple of pages of a rather primitive proposal, as I remember, and said, "How do you like the idea of this book?"

Bernard Wood (00:52:06):

Right, right. And then the other books, tell me-

Richard Wrangham (00:52:12):

Well, so that was *Demonic Males*, which by the way, I thought of as a rather orthodox behavioral ecology of chimps and bonobos. And I was amazed that people got incredibly hot under the collar about it and said, I was making outrageous inferences and so on. I'm happy to see that my more tentative ideas have actually been supported in terms of the differences in aggression between the two species.

Bernard Wood (00:52:47):

But did *Demonic Males* make a difference to your visibility? Were you asked to do things after the publication of *Demonic Males* that you weren't asked to do before?

Richard Wrangham (00:53:02):

I don't think very much. I certainly did give a few lectures and so on. I'm not sure.

Bernard Wood (00:53:11):

And then the next book was?

Richard Wrangham (00:53:14):

The next one was *Catching Fire*. In about 1999, 1998, I found myself astonished to realize that the impact of cooking on human biology had been barely explored at all. I had this insight one night sitting in the dark in front of my log fire at home, asking myself how far I would have to go back into the past to find a time when our ancestors did not sit around a fire at night. I wrote up a page of notes, and the next morning I went into the department and I spoke to David Pilbeam, Jamie Jones, Nancy Lou Conklin and others and said, "I don't understand it. How is it that people just haven't talked about this?" There were no good answers! So we wrote a paper for *Current Anthropology* focusing on the significance of cooking in human evolution and how it improves food and its digestibility in various very significant ways. That journal has a commentary section.

Bernard Wood (00:54:10):

Sure.

Richard Wrangham (00:54:11):

That led to some interesting responses. On the one hand, Loring Brace, who had been a pal at Michigan, wrote a scathing commentary just taking our paper apart and poking fun at it in various ways. But even more interestingly, Katie Milton, who was very much a leading nutritional primatologist, claimed that there's no evidence that cooking improves food at all. I think she said that the only reason that people cook food is for flavor. At any rate she certainly said that there's no evidence that cooking increases the digestive value of food. And so that I took as sort of representative of what to me was an astonishingly mistaken attitude towards a phenomenally important difference between human and non-human diets. So that led to 10 years of research, particularly conducted by my then graduate student, Rachel Carmody, and a book which I feel quite proud of because I think it did assemble for the first time what seems to me very strong biological evidence of our being adapted to the use of fire.

(00:55:31):

It also seemed to be a beautiful example of gene-culture co-evolution with great significance for humans.

Bernard Wood (00:55:38):

Yes. I mean, around that time, Mark Collard and I published a paper about the origin of homo. And one of the things that struck me was that between *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus*, you have a reduction in post-canine surface area. And so I mean, either you prepare, either you are eating different things or you are finding some way of preparing the food, which is not mastication. In other words, you are softening in some ways. And so we said something like, unless you masticate it, unless you change your diet, you've got to be doing something outside the mouth.

Richard Wrangham (00:56:33):

Okay.

Bernard Wood (00:56:36):

But of course we didn't have your imagination to think, okay, well, outside the mouth would mean you are either hammering it with a wooden mallet to make your steak a little more accessible or you are cooking it. And I remember Mark and I

talking about this, but we didn't have enough sense to join the dots. And it was interesting that you did.

Richard Wrangham (00:57:03):

But of course, there's still tremendous resistance or there was tremendous resistance from the archeological end.

Bernard Wood (00:57:10):

I know.

Richard Wrangham (00:57:10):

It just seemed too much to ask that you push fire all the way that far back.

Bernard Wood (00:57:17):

Yes, yes, yes. But I mean, the fire's there. The question is whether you can control this or generate it or what have you. So this was a second book in which you put a minor rocket up the backside of the community. Was this something that you were trying to do or was it just an emergent property of your curiosity?

Richard Wrangham (00:57:47):

Oh, it was the latter. I mean, yeah, no, I wasn't trying to get at anybody or anything. I just thought this was a really fascinating area. And I was, again, slightly naive because I was slightly surprised that one or two people reacted with a great emotion about the notion that I should dare say these things.

Bernard Wood (00:58:19):

Yes. It's interesting, the archaeologists, because I wrote a news in Views in Nature and said, "Well, why couldn't Praeanthropus make stone tools?" And I got this incredibly, I wouldn't say angry, but from Ofer and that sort of thing saying, "Stone tools are only made by *Homo*."

Richard Wrangham (00:58:51):

That's right.

Bernard Wood (00:58:53):

I mean, this is just unthinkable. I mean, so it's very interesting. It's very interesting. So there you are, you've had this successful career. Looking back, are there any regrets or are the things you wish you'd done differently?

Richard Wrangham (00:59:19):

Oh, endless. Endless regrets. Yes, right.

Bernard Wood (00:59:24):

But really serious ones?

Richard Wrangham (00:59:29):

Well, no, I mean, I don't lie in bed at night wishing that things had gone really differently. I feel I'm very proud of the fact that the chimpanzee project that I started in '87 is still going and is beautifully run by my successors.

Bernard Wood (00:59:56):

Just remind us who they are.

Richard Wrangham (00:59:58):

Well, yes, it's Melissa Emery Thompson, Martin Muller and Zarin Machanda. They're the core of it. And then we have other very close colleagues who continue to work very closely with us in that area. Katie Slocum on Cognition and Tony Goldberg on genetics.

Bernard Wood (01:00:19):

Martin Muller, is it Harvard?

Richard Wrangham (01:00:22):

No, none of them. Who did you say?

Bernard Wood (01:00:26):

Muller.

Richard Wrangham (01:00:27):

Muller. No, he's at the University of New Mexico.

Bernard Wood (01:00:32):

Oh, that's right. Okay.

Richard Wrangham (01:00:32):

Yeah. And Melissa Emery Thompson is just about to become the chair of anthropology at Duke.

Bernard Wood (01:00:41):

Oh.

Richard Wrangham (01:00:41):

And Zarin is at Tufts.

Bernard Wood (01:00:44):

Right.

Richard Wrangham (01:00:45):

But thanks to the magic of communication these days, it's possible to have people all over the place really collaborating very effectively.

Bernard Wood (01:00:53):

Right.

Richard Wrangham (01:00:53):

And I don't want to lose that strand without noting that conservation of the apes has been an issue for me. And I've tried to commit some of my time towards actions that will help conserve the apes. And I feel very happy that these sorts of long-term research projects I think are ultimately the best way to keep apes on the planet. I think that I have a very pessimistic view and perspective overall that we're going to lose a vast numbers of the populations, but if we can get in every country, one or two places where they survive, well, that's fantastic.

Bernard Wood (01:01:45):

Right. I mean, we were talking earlier on about Museveni who's been the president in Uganda forever. How much support from the Ugandan government and how much realization at the government level is there of the importance of conserving the chimps?

Richard Wrangham (01:02:12):

Well, it's very practical. In 2006, I was the president of the International Primatological Society, and we had the meeting in Entebbe in Uganda, and we

managed to persuade President Museveni to come and give an opening speech. And so he stood next to me and he said to a thousand people, "I like primates."

Bernard Wood (01:02:41):

Well done.

Richard Wrangham (01:02:44):

Well, that was great. Then he said, "I like primates because tourism has become the number one earner of foreign exchange other than remittances sent by Ugandans living abroad; and tourism to see primates is the major part of that." Now, of course that “major part” referred to tourism to see gorillas, but chimps have become important too. There are now four chimpanzee sites in Uganda where people can get good views of chimps, Budongo, Kyambura, Kalinzu, and Kibale. In 1988 I wrote the first sort of plea to start ecotourism to see chimps in Kibale and it is, I think, the most popular place in the world for seeing chimps. And people undoubtedly recognize the significance of it in terms of the economy around that area. So I feel that we now have pretty substantial political support, which is always needed, because in an area like that, if you're going to be practical, you have to think that it won't be too long before there will be political disturbances.

(01:04:07):

There'll be times when everything breaks down, people are able to move into the forest, there'll be hunting that people can't stop and so on. And you just hope that those kinds of civil disturbance are going to last for a sufficiently short time that the habitat and its populations can recover. In these unpredictable circumstances, the more political support you have, the better right now.

Bernard Wood (01:04:30):

And in terms of the numbers of chimps in Uganda, what is the medium long-term trend?

Richard Wrangham (01:04:40):

Oh, well, it's going sharply downwards because everywhere outside the national parks will be lost. That's the big picture, I fear. But you've got, I'm not sure of the numbers exactly, but maybe a little bit more than 5,000 chimps in the various parks and forest reserves of Uganda. And if you can keep them going, that's great. But meanwhile, you asked me about why I wanted to study chimps earlier, and I said in terms of looking at behavioral variation among places. The other big aspect is that here we are with our closest relative on earth, or to be more accurate with one of

our two closest relatives, and we're still at a fairly primitive level of understanding of their way of like. Unfortunately there's every chance that by the end of the century, there'll be very limited opportunities to study them. From the point of view of thinking about the human place on Earth and the nature of the great apes, people in a few thousand years' time will be grateful that we have as many studies of apes going as possible now, when the apes are more numerous than they soon will be.

(01:06:04):

And it's been marvelous over the last 10 or 15 years. There are all sorts of new studies getting going. It's just great.

Bernard Wood (01:06:13):

And the involvement of Africans in this work ...

Richard Wrangham (01:06:19):

Is increasing.

Bernard Wood (01:06:21):

Yes. I mean, I know you've been trying to encourage this, but do you think it's increasing at a satisfactory rate or do you think that-

Richard Wrangham (01:06:29):

No, I think the paleo people have done better on this, while the primatologists have to some extent lagged behind. You can see why in some ways, because maybe there's a little bit less glamor associated with long hours spent in the forest and the papers that come out rather slowly from all that observational fieldwork. When you have someone in Ethiopia or Kenya who can put their name on a new species of *Homo* or *Australopithecus* or whatever, that's pretty dramatic. It's less dramatic when they can say, "Oh, guess what? The testosterone levels are actually low in this alpha male contrary to what you expect in other populations." Even so, there are increasing numbers of African ape-ologists. Our Kibale project in Uganda has been run in the field for many years by Emily Otali, who got her PhD with me 20 years ago, and she's been fantastic. She was the first African woman to get a PhD studying great apes, and still one of only a handful.

(01:07:47):

It'd be nice to see more.

Bernard Wood (01:07:54):

Yes. It would be.

Richard Wrangham (01:07:55):

The Leakey Foundation is great because they've been a wonderful supporter, of course, of trying to institutionalize this.

Bernard Wood (01:08:02):

Right, right. So Richard, is there anything that I have not asked you that you would like to talk about?

Richard Wrangham (01:08:12):

Well, my current fascination is with the notion that the way to understand the evolution of *Homo sapiens* is to think about domestication of the alpha males. The idea is that with language came the ability of alliances to overcome the previous alpha male, a predictably bullying type. What this led to was, I believe, was a new species that was a self-domesticated form of the old one. So *Homo sapiens* is a self-domesticated form of *heidelbergensis* (or whatever you call the predecessor). To me, this is an incredibly exciting area, which is especially attractive because it is in many ways testable. The big test I'm looking forward to seeing is to compare in more detail than has been done so far, the genetics of humans compared to Neanderthals, comparing that comparison to domesticated species compared to their wild ancestors. And I feel there's a whole new area of biologic anthropology that people haven't yet taken very seriously and will be a really promising investigation for our deep origins.

Bernard Wood (01:10:00):

So do you think, I mean, what really strikes me about your career and what I've known of it, or I mean, you and I haven't been close, but I'm very conscious of it, is that you have really big ideas. And where do you think that comes from? Is that sort of nature or nurture or a mixture of both?

Richard Wrangham (01:10:31):

Well, there may be all sort of psychological aspects underlying my interests, but the factor that I feel most affected by is my history of studying wild animals. Take cooking. I have done many, many days of getting up before dawn and being with a chimpanzee all day and seeing it eat. And yet it still took me many years after that to say, "Hey, wait a minute, I'm not eating that much. I only eat for a very brief time

every day. What's going on? What's different?" And then asking questions that led to focusing on cooking as a massive factor affecting human biology. So I find myself on common ground with people who come to the study of humans who not only think about evolution in theory, but also have a deep experience of animal natural history.

Bernard Wood (01:11:43):

Yes, yes. I mean, the few days I spent with you in Kibale made me develop a huge respect for people who look at chimpanzees because my memory was that we got up extremely early. You took us and the students to the fig trees where the figs were ripe and that you knew the chimps would make their way. The chimps did make their way. You could hear them coming through the forest. They sat all over the tree eating the figs, and then it didn't take them long to develop pretty loose stools. And so I remember your graduate students rushing out to try and collect the poop or the urine or whatever it was, and I thought, "Boy." And then in the afternoon, they sort of sat around and they sat around and farted and ate vegetation. And so that sort of struck me that if you're trying to reconstruct the diet of an early hominin, are you reconstructing the morning, in which case it was consuming figs, or are you constructing the afternoon, in which case it was consuming something that looked like celery?

Richard Wrangham (01:13:12):

Yeah. Yeah.

Bernard Wood (01:13:16):

And so that was a very important insight that if you're trying to reconstruct the diet, it's not a simple ... They don't conveniently go to the supermarket and buy the same stuff.

Richard Wrangham (01:13:31):

That's right. Yes.

Bernard Wood (01:13:33):

Okay. Well, Richard, it's been a great pleasure, and I hope that people will get some insights as to what lies behind your long and successful career. And it's been an enormous pleasure for me, and I hope you've found it interesting too.

Richard Wrangham (01:13:51):

No, this is wonderful. Let's do it every day. No, it's a real honor to talk with you, someone so distinguished in the field.

Bernard Wood (01:14:03):

Well, no, no, no. I think that's not true. And you are the distinguished one because you are the person being interviewed. So Richard, thank you very much. I realized that your middle name is the same name as my mother's family, the slocums from the West Country.

Richard Wrangham (01:14:23):

Oh?

Bernard Wood (01:14:24):

Most of them are called Walter.

Richard Wrangham (01:14:29):

Oh, both my grandfathers.

Bernard Wood (01:14:31):

Okay. Okay. Yes. Do you know where that comes ... It sounds a sort of German name, but do you know what Walter-

Richard Wrangham (01:14:39):

I don't know anything about it. My maternal grandfather was Irish.

Bernard Wood (01:14:42):

Okay.

Richard Wrangham (01:14:43):

Okay. So that doesn't stop him from having a German name, I guess.

Bernard Wood (01:14:50):

No, it's interesting how incurious you can be that I wonder where Walter comes from.

Richard Wrangham (01:14:58):

Yeah.

Bernard Wood (01:14:59):
Richard, thank you very much indeed.

Richard Wrangham (01:15:00):
Okay. Thank you so much for your time.